

Despite the devastating effects of the worst natural disaster in American history, our communities are rebuilding. It's a tedious process requiring tremendous determination, but the resilient people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast are making strides every day toward rebuilding and improving their cities and communities.

One obvious illustration of which I am very proud is the development of the Mississippi Gulf Region Water, Wastewater, and Storm Water Plan. Even before the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, in many areas throughout the six southernmost counties of Mississippi, water and sewer infrastructure was in great state of disrepair. The hurricane only added to the environmental problems associated with failing septic systems and aging sewage lines, and it further emphasized the region's greater need for safe freshwater supplies. Through the development of the Gulf Region Water, Wastewater, and Storm Water Plan, we are working to ensure that infrastructure is sufficient to meet the sustained and growing needs of the entire region.

The Plan, proposed by the Final Report of the Governor's Commission's on Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal, will make recommendations for infrastructure development in areas that are particularly vulnerable to dangerous storms. Recommendations could include modifying existing infrastructure to reduce storm damage, or even relocating infrastructure to less storm-prone areas. Taking into account existing and future growth patterns for the region, the Plan will also serve as a blueprint for long-term growth, recovery, and prosperity. We are working to anticipate growth patterns and the corresponding utility needs for the next 5, 10, and 20 years.

I appointed the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality to lead the team which is creating the Plan. Other agencies participating in this project include: MS Department of Health; MS Department of Marine Resources; MS Public Service Commission; MS Development Authority; and the federal Gulf of Mexico Program. MDEQ has engaged an engineering firm, the Mississippi Engineering Group, Inc., to assist in the development of the Gulf Region Water, Wastewater, and Storm Water Plan. Together, this public-private partnership is working hard to ensure the needs of the region are met for years to come.

Throughout the planning process, MDEQ has utilized the participation and input of local officials. The success of the Plan is absolutely dependent upon their involvement and

consensus. County Utility Authorities were established by the Legislature in Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, and Stone counties. The leadership of the respective utility authorities will be integral to the planning process and management of water, wastewater, and stormwater in the region.

In May, the Mississippi Engineering Group consulting team held stakeholder meetings in Hancock, Harrison, George, Jackson, Pearl River, and Stone counties. These meetings included municipal and county officials, community leaders, and state agencies. Using maps and presentations, the team introduced a Plan overview and answered questions about the review process. Stakeholders were given the opportunity to review the team's work, provide input, and ask questions about various proposals for infrastructure development and improvement. Participants could also express their views by completing a meeting evaluation and a two-page questionnaire that would help identify some of the immediate infrastructure needs and priorities of their communities.

Attendees completed questionnaires prioritizing community issues and factors to be considered for evaluating for projects. A sampling of the results included:

- 64% of respondents listed wastewater as their top priority;
- 80% of respondents wrote that they receive many complaints about wastewater;
- 48% of respondents rated the economic outlook for their community as excellent.

Throughout the month of June, the team members held special task force meetings in each county regarding economic recovery for the region. Since then, the team has been evaluating future needs for the area and has begun compiling a draft of the Plan. In September, a round of public meetings will be held to gather comments and input from the general public on the Plan. After all alternatives have been carefully studied and the communities have provided their input, the Plan will prioritize the needs of the region as a whole. The projected date for completion of the Plan is October. Once it is approved, we will utilize more than half a billion dollars provided by Congress for its implementation.

There are enormous benefits to addressing water, sewer, and storm water needs using this regional approach. Working with communities, it is our goal to help provide the citizens

of South Mississippi with safe and reliable drinking water and protect the environment with improved sewage and storm water treatment. It is our goal to implement protective measures for vulnerable water and sewage systems, even if that means relocating certain infrastructure. Where practical, we hope that communities are able to share infrastructure and treatment systems as well as implement similar types of systems. After the storm, a county supervisor said to me, “It sure would have been easier to repair our water systems if we’d only had one or two different types. We were scrounging everywhere for parts to patch things up.” To me, that makes a lot of sense. System sharing and homogenizing utility infrastructure will result in lower costs for local governments, cheaper utility rates for citizens, and make repairs easier and faster when damages occur.

This is an enormous undertaking, but despite the complexity, it must be done quickly, effectively, and correctly. We will not get another chance to make these types of improvements which will dramatically improve quality of life and economic development opportunities for the southernmost six counties for decades to come.